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# SOCI 130S.01: Sociology of Alternative Religions

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Sociology 130  
SOCIOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS  
Spring, 2018

Instructor – Rob Balch

Office hours:

Monday –10:00-11:30, 1:00-2:00

Tuesday – 10:00-12:00

Wednesday & Friday – 10:00-11:30

Or by appointment – 728-6508 (home), [rob.balch@umontana.edu](mailto:rob.balch@umontana.edu)

Course Description

This course will examine controversial new religions in North America from 1950 to the present. Commonly known as “cults”, these religions offer new beliefs and ways of living that challenge mainstream assumptions about reality. As a result, they often experience intense opposition, including ridicule, harassment, legal actions to limit their activities, and even violent attacks.

Among sociologists the term “cult” simply refers to a religion that is new and different in society, but to the general public the word conjures up images of brainwashing, sexual abuse, violence, and mass suicide. Extreme actions do occur and will be examined in class, but most cults are benign and some have positive effects on their members and the communities where they live. Nonetheless, the word “cult” has been so tainted that today most sociologists have replaced it with neutral terms such as “new religious movement” or “alternative religion”.

Though commonly viewed as fringe phenomena, cults are found worldwide and throughout history, and they are an important source of religious and social change. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century Spiritualism promoted gender equality and the abolition of slavery, and in the 1960s the challenge posed by new religions helped fuel the rise of the Christian Evangelical movement.

Topics we will cover include:

- New religions in American history
- Belief systems and social organization
- Millennialism and the end-times
- How new religions begin
- Why people join
- Charismatic leadership
- Commitment and the “brainwashing” controversy
- How new religions change – accommodation to the outside world, corruption and group disintegration, violence and mass suicide, winning public

acceptance, and sect formation

### Course objectives

By the end of this course you should be able to:

- use social science concepts to describe 1) societal conditions influencing the appeal of unconventional religious movements, 2) variation in their belief systems and forms of social organization, and 3) the experiences of individual members.
- understand how cults and sects originate and change over time.
- use social science concepts and theories to understand contemporary controversial new religious groups and their impact on individuals.
- understand and evaluate research on unconventional religions

### Class rules

To help make this class a worthwhile experience for everyone, please observe the following courtesies:

1. Be on time for class. If you must arrive late, please use the back door.
2. Please keep the chitchat down and don't use your computer for anything other than taking notes—both are very distracting for others.
3. Turn off your phone.
4. If you have to come in late or leave early, please use the back door.
5. And please do not begin packing up until the lecture is finished.

### Preceptors

The preceptors are undergraduate students who received an A in this course the last time it was offered. They will conduct review sessions before each exam, show any evening extra-credit videos that might be scheduled, assign points to extra-credit papers, and hold office hours before and after each midterm exam. Their hours will be announced in class and posted on Moodle.

The preceptors are useful resources who can help you do well in this class. Not only are they familiar with the course material, but they understand how I test and can help you prepare. In addition to answering questions about lectures and readings, they can help with procedural problems, e.g., questions about the syllabus, extra-credit issues, or clarification of announcements.

### Using Moodle

Announcements, study guides, and grades will be communicated through Moodle. You should check it regularly because announcements are unpredictable and may be cause for joy or gloom. I will also post a few required readings on Moodle, as well as many that are optional.

### Required reading & videos

The required reading consists of one textbook and three articles on Moodle. You also will be expected to watch four videos on Moodle, ranging in length from 15 to 35 minutes. The text is New Age, Neopagan & New Religious Movements by Hugh Urban (2015), available in the UM bookstore or online.

In the course outline (see below), the readings and/or videos pertaining to each class meeting are noted in parentheses. Optional readings (not covered on the exams) are noted as such. Some optional readings give more detail on topics covered in lectures; others cover topics that we won't have time for in class; and a few provide a perspective that differs from mine. To access the material on Moodle, just click on the link next to the topic for a particular date. Complete references for articles and videos are included in the daily schedule on Moodle.

The first optional reading is actually a book, The Secret World of Cults by Sarah Moran, 1999. Intended for a popular audience, it covers the most notorious new religious movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, devoting three to four pages to each, with pictures. From time to time I will recommend particular selections from the book, but the entire book is worthwhile.

### Exams and grading

There will be three exams--two midterms and a comprehensive final. Each midterm is worth 30% of your total score and the final 40%. All exams will consist of multiple-choice questions and will be graded on a percentage basis: 90% and above = A, 80% = B, etc. I do not use the plus-minus system.

A study guide will be posted on Moodle before each exam. If you have done the reading by the time you get it, it will be easy to find the relevant points. If you wait on reading until you've got the study guide, you're likely to be in trouble.

The preceptors will conduct a review session shortly before each exam, but you will need to come with questions. Don't expect them to tell you what will or will not be on the exam, or to provide capsule summaries of lectures you missed.

You may bring one page of notes to each exam. You may write on both sides, however much you can squeeze on a page, as long as that page is no larger than 8½" x 11". No electronic aids allowed.

### Extra credit

You can earn extra credit by attending one or more night-time extra-credit presentations. Each is worth one percentage point to be added to the average of your exam scores. To receive credit you must arrive on time and stay for the entire presentation. Unless otherwise announced, sessions will begin at 7:00 p.m. sharp. Late arrivals may stay but will not receive credit. Dates, times, and locations will be announced in class and on Moodle.

For those who can't attend evening sessions, the presentations will be recorded. However, to receive credit you must submit a two-page response to a question that I will give you along with the recording. If you choose this option you must let me know by 5:00 pm the day after the presentation. You will have one day to submit your paper. Papers must be typed double-space with standard font and margins. Either email or paper is fine.

### Special accommodations

If you have a disability, please contact me as soon as possible and I will make reasonable accommodations. UM assures equal access to instruction through the collaboration of students with disabilities, their instructors, and Disability Services. "Reasonable" means UM permits no fundamental changes in academic standards or retroactive modifications.

If English is not your second language, you may obtain notes from the preceptors and use a translator during exams. However, you must check with me first.

### Other exceptions to normal procedures

Make-up exams will be allowed if you have a compelling reason why you can't take the exam at the scheduled time. I may ask for written documentation. If you wish to reschedule, you must make arrangements with me before the exam date. If you don't make prior arrangements, you may still take the exam, but you will be docked five percentage points. Missed exams must be made up before the exam is returned to the rest of the class.

To receive a grade of Incomplete, by University policy you must have a D or better after the midterms and experience circumstances that make it impossible to complete the course. Bad grades or potential loss of financial aid are not acceptable reasons for receiving an Incomplete.

Cheating in any form will result in an F on the exam and possibly failing the course.

If you do not return borrowed materials (e.g., books, videos, articles) by the last day of class, you will receive an Incomplete, which will turn into an F if the items are not returned or replaced.

### Tips for doing well in the course

Do the reading and attend class. The exams will cover both. Even when the same topic is covered in both the text and lectures, either the information or emphasis is likely to be different. In any case, most lectures will be illustrated, whereas book has only a few pictures.

Because so much of the course material is visual, I will use a lot of PowerPoints. These will be posted on Moodle shortly after each lecture. However, they are not a substitute for attending class and taking notes because the text accompanying each picture will be bare bones. To make best use of the PowerPoints, you should review them soon after class and be sure you understand how each picture (or the story I tell about it) illustrates the point I was trying to make.

You are responsible for taking your own notes. You may use a computer as long as you only use it for taking notes. If you miss class, you may borrow notes from one of the preceptors, but only if you have a compelling reason for not being able to get notes from another student and if you get my approval first.

### COURSE OUTLINE

All topics and exam dates are subject to change. You are responsible for keeping abreast of changes, which will be announced on Moodle and in class.

Readings that are most relevant to each topic are noted, by author, in parentheses. "Urban" refers to the textbook. All other names refer to readings and videos on Moodle. Readings not covered on the exams are labeled "optional" . If nothing appears in parentheses, there is no particular reading for that topic.

#### Introduction

Jan.	22	Overview of the course
	24	Mainstream religion – Churches & sects (Optional: Stark on religion, churches, sects & cults)
	26	Cults as new religions (Urban Ch.1, 2, 5; Optional: Stein on 19 <sup>th</sup> c. communal societies; Moran on Nation of Islam 116-199)

Basic concepts – Inside a world-rejecting UFO cult (Urban 14; Optional: Moran on UFO cults 48-65)

Jan.	29	Walking out the door of your life – The mystery of sudden conversion
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- 31 Caterpillars to butterflies -- Belief systems  
 Feb. 2 Inside the cocoon -- Totalism  
 5 Tuning in – Learning to think like a member

#### The millennial theme – Visions of the end times

- Feb. 7 Cross-cultural, historic & contemporary millennial movements  
 (Optional: Worsley on cargo cults; Stein on 19<sup>th</sup> c. millennialism; Palmer on Twelve Tribes )

#### The Great American Cult Scare – 1965-1985

- Feb. 9 Setting the stage – Baby boomers & the counterculture (Optional: Morgan on the counterculture; Stevens on LSD)  
 12 The collapse of idealism (Optional: Morgan, Stevens)  
 14 Turning to religion – Crisis cults (Urban 10; Optional: Moran on '60s groups: 34-37 on Unification Church, 42-43 on TM, 44-47 on Hare Krishna, 84-85 on Children of God, 88-91 on Manson Family, 96-99 on Church of Satan; Eskridge on Jesus People)  
 16 Controversy and the experts – Anti-cultists & cult apologists (Urban 1)  
 19 Presidents Day – no class

#### Why people joined

- Feb. 21 A theory of conversion to totalism (Gelberg on joining the Krishna, required)  
 23 The mask of commitment – Verbal vs total converts
- Feb. 26 FIRST EXAM – Text chapters 1, 2, 5, 10, 14; Gelberg on Moodle

#### The Love Family & the brainwashing controversy

- Feb. 28 Diverging paths in the counterculture – the Rainbow Family & the Love Family
- March 2 We are One, but some are better than others – Belief & social structure (Optional: Dawson on sex & gender)  
 5 Charisma – The divine gift  
 7 Becoming a member (Optional: Bromley & Shupe critique of 'brainwashing; Hassan on 'mind control')  
 9 Intensifying commitment – Being in Love's mind (Optional: Bromley & Shupe; Hassan)

#### The power of faith – What happens when prophecies fail?

- Mar. 12 Doomsday in Missoula (Optional: Balch, Farnsworth & Wilkins)

#### How new religions begin

- Mar. 14 The psychopathology model – Mental illness or divine revelation? (Lowe, required)

- 16 The entrepreneurial model – Religion as business (Urban 7)
- 19 Subculture-evolution – How (relatively) ordinary groups turn into religions (Lindholm on Manson Family, required)

#### The New Age and Neopagan movements – 1980s & '90s

- Mar. 21 The “alternative reality” – Dawning of the New Age (Urban 4, 8, 9 & review pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1; Optional: Jenkins on Satanism scare)
- 23 Seekers & gurus (Optional: Moran on Rajneesh; Balch on charisma & control; Todd on New Age religion in Pacific NW)

March 27-30 – SPRING BREAK!

- April 2 Channeling & Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment (Urban 11; Ramtha videos, required)
- 4 RSE scandals & defenders (Optional: Melton; “Ramtha Riled”)
- April 6 SECOND EXAM – Urban 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1; Lowe; Lindholm; Ramtha videos)

#### How new religions evolve – 1970s-2000s

- April 9 Rise of Church Universal & Triumphant (CUT video, required; Optional: Prophet on CUT)
- 11 CUT – Descending karma
- 13 Survival on the fringe – The Twelve Tribes (Optional: Palmer)
- 16 Corruption & revolt – The Love Family
- 18 Mass suicide at Jonestown (Urban 12; Optional: Moran 68-73)
- 20 Waco & the role of external enemies (Urban 13; Optional: Moran 76-79)
- 23 The Heaven’s Gate mass suicide (Urban pp. 16-20; Optional: Moran 68-75 on Aum Shinrikyo & Order of Solar Temple)
- 25 Heaven’s Gate – Creating a predisposition to extreme behavior
- 27 Heaven’s Gate – From readiness to action

#### Public acceptance & sect formation

- April 30 The Mormon Church – From new religion to respectable denomination (Urban 3)
- May 2 Polygamous sects – Communities & independents (Optional: Lemons on The Order)
- 4 The Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) – The perils of totalitarian religion (Hyde on FLDS, required)
- May FINAL EXAM – Urban 3, 12, 13, pp. 16-20; CUT video; Hyde